SURVIVING TROUBLED TIMES: FIVE BEST PRACTICES FOR TRAINING SOLUTIONS

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Although executives in the current economic downturn have often downsized human resource, training, and performance improvement staff, five strategies can help training and performance improvement professionals survive these trying times: (1) align efforts with business goals, (2) use training to address skill gaps, (3) craft job-focused objectives, (4) create sound training, and (5) collaborate with others to promote transfer to the job.

THE BUSINESS OF training and performance improvement has always been cyclical, with the fortunes of human resource development (HRD) and performance improvement professionals rising and falling with the economic fortunes of the workplace. As of 2010, training is a $52.8 billion undertaking, with the industry failing to bounce quickly back from the recession and most budgets either remaining the same or being cut back ("2010 Training Industry Report," 2010).

The current economic downturn and nascent recovery represent an opportunity for HRD and performance improvement professionals to refocus their efforts to improve the value they offer organizations. This means looking for opportunities to achieve results that matter to executives, managers, and other stakeholders who control budgets and resources. As depicted in Figure 1, this article argues that HRD or human performance technology (HPT) professionals can best survive troubled times and position themselves for recovery by producing on-the-job behavioral change and measurable performance results that meet business goals. To this end, professionals should adopt several best practices described in the literature:

1. Align efforts with organizational missions and business goals.
2. Use training only when it addresses a gap between existing and desired performance arising from a lack of requisite skill.
3. Craft instructional objectives that describe exemplary job performance.
4. Create sound training programs that promote learning and transfer to the job.
5. Collaborate with sponsors and other stakeholders outside the training department to promote transfer of training to the job.

Following these practices will help executives determine their return on training investments, managers see on-the-job behavioral change that leverages the performance of exemplary personnel, and trainees confidently apply relevant skills and knowledge to the workplace.

ALIGNING TRAINING WITH STRATEGIC BUSINESS OBJECTIVES

Reviewing the results of over 400 impact studies they had conducted, Phillips and Phillips (2002) identified 11 reasons that training and development efforts fail. The most common reason was a lack of alignment with business needs. Organizations often implement training for the wrong reasons, such as trends, desires, or other needs that may be more perceived than actual. Without a link to business goals and organizational missions, training professionals cannot tie their efforts to any sort of improvement in the business—let alone executive expectations regarding a return on their investments of scarce organizational resources. Such unaligned training often suffers a lack of organizational sponsorship throughout its life cycle—however long that may be. Without sponsorship, it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to demonstrate the

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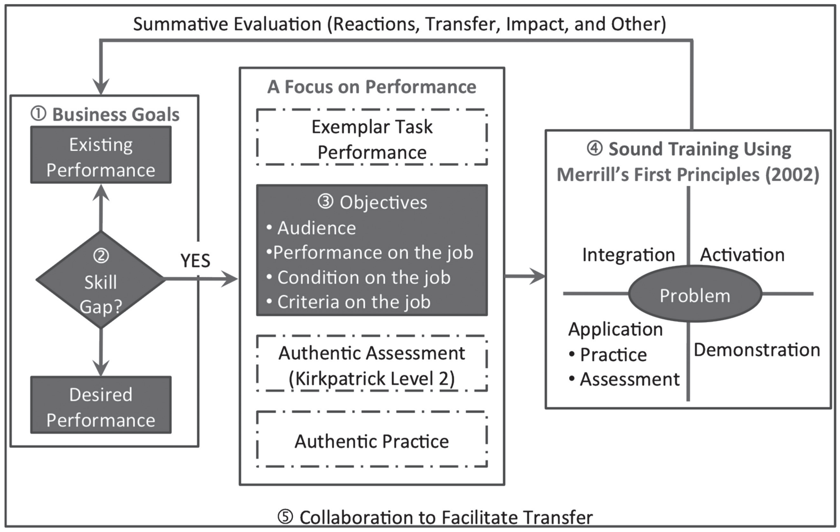


Note. Adapted from "First Principles of Instruction," by M. D. Merrill, 2002, *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 50 (3), p. 45. Copyright 2002 by Springer. Adapted with permission.

FIGURE 1. FIVE BEST PRACTICES FOR TRAINING PROFESSIONALS

overall impact of a training program to the sponsor who funded it—let alone the rest of the organization. Rivera (2007) suggested finding areas where training can leverage strengths and shore up organizational weaknesses. Opportunities to align training with business goals typically lie in areas that appear in Table 1.

Because of the importance of alignment and realignment throughout the life of a project, Villachica, Stone, and Endicott (2004) recommended adding an alignment phase to the standard instructional systems development model. During this initial phase, a training department collaborates with a sponsor and other stakeholders to align the requests for training with business goals and organizational missions, specify critical success factors for the training effort, and determine associated evaluation measures associated with organizational results and return on investments.

CLOSING SKILL GAPS

To be worth an organization's investment in money, time, and resources, training should address performance gaps caused by skill and knowledge deficits (see Figure 1). These gaps between existing and desired performance occur when people lack the skill and knowledge to perform—as opposed to other reasons. Phillips and Phillips's (2002) second most common reason for the failure of training and development programs is a failure to recognize nontraining solutions. There is little or no payoff for developing and implementing the wrong solution, and there are a variety of performance gaps for which a lack of skill or knowledge is not the underlying cause. The behavioral engineering model (Gilbert, 2007) specifies potential causes of gaps between existing and desired performance. Dean (1997) investigated the relative frequencies with which these causes occur. Table 2, depicting Dean's results, indicates that causes other than a lack of skill and knowledge account for 89.4% of all performance gaps, and training is the appropriate solution for closing a performance gap only about 10% of the time.

Because over 45% of all potential performance gaps arise from a lack of information (data and knowledge), training professionals need to determine where information to close performance gaps should reside. One possibility is in the environment, where people could access the directions they need to perform their tasks using a job aid, a tool, or some sort of performance support that acts as "a repository for information, processes, and perspectives that inform and guide planning and action" (Rossett & Schafer, 2007, p. 2). The other is in the heads of performers, where people access internalized skills and knowledge learned in training and recalled from memory.

Organizations that use job aids or performance support to address performance gaps arising from a lack of access to data can obtain desired performances without incurring training development, delivery, and maintenance costs. Use of job aids limits training to situations in which the skill must reside in the individual performer, and training professionals have eliminated all other environmental causes of performance gaps. Harless (1986) offered the flowchart in Figure 2 to illustrate how to determine whether a job aid or training is appropriate.

TABLE 1 OPPORTUNITIES AND MEASURES FOR ALIGNING TRAINING WITH BUSINESS GOALS

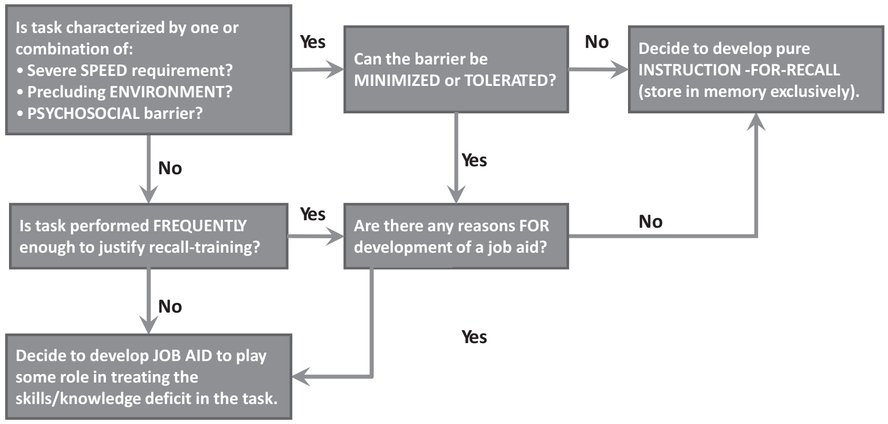
OPPORTUNITY FOR ALIGNMENT	DEFINITION	EXAMPLE
Improved productivity	Greater ability to produce an increase in items that can be exchanged for cash or booked as future sellable assets	Output of goods and services
Increased organizational capacity and growth	A perceived future competitive advantage based on talents the organization develops internally rather than acquires	Scalability of business processes
Improved ability to seize opportunities within short time frames (organizational nimbleness)	Excess organizational capacity and human competencies and the ability to deploy them quickly	Adapting, retooling, and refocusing to enter markets quickly
Reduced scrap and rework	Reduction of defective products to a level below either the organization's existing or industry benchmarks	Disposal costs and efficiency of production processes
Increased customer satisfaction	Overall product quality and customer satisfaction	Barriers to entry for competitors and customer loyalty
Increased employee satisfaction and retention	Employees' attitudes about their job placement and work challenges	Employee morale and willingness to perform
Increased time and focus on value-producing goals	Increased percentage of billable project time or improved accuracy of time reports, maximized value creation, and associated time allocation	Historical data for estimating costs
Lower operational and franchise risks	Reduced operational risks due to employee negligence or carelessness and franchise risks caused by employee misconduct or malevolence	Compensation of inconvenienced customers or delays in product launches
Fewer poor management decisions	Improved speed and quality of decisions and decreased cost of obtaining information	Reduced direct and indirect costs for the decision taken and the next best course of action
Improved succession planning	Reduced employee replacement costs and lost productivity, compounded over time if the position remains unfilled	Development time and cost required to achieve a predecessor's level of proficiency

Source. Rivera, 2007.

TABLE 2 RELATIVE FREQUENCY OF CAUSES OF GAPS BETWEEN EXISTING AND DESIRED PERFORMANCE

	INFORMATION	INSTRUMENTATION	MOTIVES
Environmental factors	Data (35.3%): Lack of standards, clear and adequate directions, relevant and timely feedback	Resources (29%): Lack of adequate tools, materials, processes, procedures, and work environment	Incentives (11.3%): Lack of financial and nonfinancial incentives for desired performance
Individual factors	Knowledge (10.5%): Lack of adequate skill and knowledge, access to scientifically designed training matching requirements of exemplary performance	Capacity (7.5%): Lack of adequate hiring and selection for job tasks; physical, mental, emotional ability	Motivation (6.3%): Lack of motive to work or recruitment of people unaligned with the realities of the situation

Source. Based on Dean, 1997.



Source. Harless, 1986.

FIGURE 2. FLOWCHART FOR DETERMINING WHETHER A JOB AID OR TRAINING IS APPROPRIATE

As illustrated in Table 3, sponsors and others who are requesting training may have quite different outcomes in mind (assuming that they have some in mind) because they do not use the term *training* with the same rigor as training professionals do. Unfortunately, this lack of rigor can place training professionals at risk. The implication is that training professionals should understand the problem the requester is trying to solve before creating a solution for it. This means that every training request should undergo analysis from the start for these reasons (Hale, 2007; Harless, 1973; Robinson & Robinson, 2008; Rossett, 1987, 2009; Rummler, 2007):

- To specify the gap between existing and desired performance using measurable terms
- To align the gap with the organization's goals or mission
- To determine whether the gap is worth closing
- To determine whether the gap arises from a lack of skill and knowledge rather than environmental or other potential causes
- To use training to address skill gaps or create appropriate nontraining performance improvement solutions (or partner with those outside the training department who can)

JOB-FOCUSED INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

Instructional objectives for a training solution should focus on the job (see Figure 1). In addition, these objectives should arise from an analysis of the job and guide the creation of authentic assessments of job performance and practice exercises that prepare people for the assessments. Mager (1962) explained that instructional objectives should have three parts:

- A behavior specifying what trainees are able to do to demonstrate achievement of the objective
- Conditions specifying the circumstances that will exist when the trainees are demonstrating their mastery of the objective
- Criteria specifying how well trainees should be able to demonstrate their achievement of the objective.

Figure 3 indicates that the focus on instructional objectives begins with an analysis of job tasks that training will address. These task descriptions then form the basis of instructional objectives, practice exercises, and assessments. The performances, conditions, and criteria associated with these components should be congruent across job tasks, objectives, practice exercises, and assessments. In addition to specifying tasks, this analysis describes exemplary performances that make up each task, as well as the conditions under which the performance occurs and the criteria that the performance must meet to satisfy job requirements.

Professionals then use information from the task analysis to craft instructional objectives. In training situations, each component of the instructional objectives should have a distinct job focus:

- *Performance:* What people should do on the job to perform in the same way that the organization's exemplars do?

TABLE 3	REQUESTS FOR TRAINING AND THEIR UNDERLYING MEANINGS	
A CLIENT REQUESTING "TRAINING" COULD REALLY BE ASKING FOR	FOR THE PURPOSE OF	TO ADDRESS A PERFORMANCE GAP ARISING FROM A LACK OF
An orientation	Providing information or increasing awareness	Data (standards, directions, feedback)
A "pick-me-up" or "keep-me-going"	Motivating personnel to reach a goal or perform better	Incentives Motives Feedback
An activity to "check off"	Complying with a regulation	Data (standards, directions, feedback) Tools Incentives Skill or knowledge Capacity Motives
A change in perspective	Changing perceptions and attitudes	Incentives Motives Capacity
Career planning and mentoring	Improving succession planning	Skill or knowledge Capacity Motives
A way to address an unspecified problem	Solving the problem without really knowing its causes	Data (standards, directions, feedback) Tools Incentives Skill or knowledge Capacity Motives
Training	Closing skill gaps	Skill or knowledge

- *Conditions:* Under what circumstances employees will perform well on the job, including cues that describe how exemplary employees perform each part of a task and the resources they use in the process?
- *Criteria:* What defines doing the performance well on the job—that is, the standards that exemplary performance meets to close the skill gap and meet the organization's mission and business goals?

Table 4 depicts several job-focused instructional objectives for trainees in a variety of workplace settings.

Objectives are like a north star for training professionals. They act as an essential navigational aid that points the way and helps instructional designers, learners, and clients stay on course to improve workplace performance. Objectives focused on job performance help instructional designers omit irrelevant content and activities that will require time and resources but have little or no effect on learning and job performance. Job-focused objectives also facilitate the transfer of learned performance to the job.

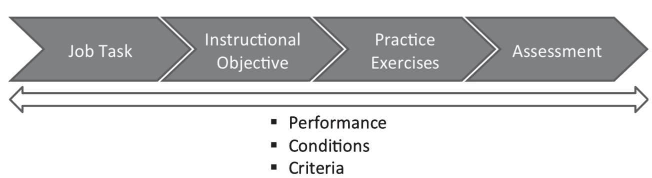


FIGURE 3. CONGRUENCE ACROSS JOB TASKS AND TRAINING COMPONENTS

TABLE 4	SAMPLE MAGER-STYLE JOB-FOCUSED INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES	
PERFORMANCE	CONDITIONS (GIVENS)	CRITERIA
Construction managers will estimate material costs	Given: A blueprint Using: An estimation spreadsheet	Within 5% of actual costs Within project budget
Nurses will administer drugs	Given: A physician's orders Necessary equipment Using: The prescription administration software	Right drug Right amount Right time Right patient Right route (e.g., oral, intramuscular)
Marketing personnel will create an ad campaign	Given: A product launch Authorization	Meet targeted goals Within schedule, scope, and budget
Cartographers will label a map	Using: A map A data set Software Set of instructions	Right attributes Appropriate fonts, text size, colors Within 1% scaled accuracy

CREATING SOUND TRAINING PROGRAMS

Training professionals should create strong training programs that promote learning and transfer to the job. One way to do this is to use an instructional model such as Merrill's (2002) first principles. Instructional models bring order to instruction, suggesting what should happen throughout the entire process. Building on the work of other theorists, Merrill and colleagues (Merrill, 2002; Merrill, Barclay, & van Schaak, 2007) identified five prescriptive principles of instruction, with further guidance provided by specific corollaries. Table 5 describes Merrill's principles and implications for training professionals that we have derived.

LOOKING OUTSIDE THE TRAINING DEPARTMENT

Training professionals should collaborate with sponsors and other stakeholders to promote transfer to the job (see Figure 1). In a study of 150 organizations, Saks and Belcourt (2006) suggest that transfer of training to the job is complex, with various researchers (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Burke & Hutchins, 2007; Ford & Weissbein, 1997) maintaining that trainee characteristics, training design, and the work environment interact to influence learning and retention in ways that produce consistent performances on the job. To ensure that these factors are considered, training or performance improvement professionals should look for opportunities to develop an ongoing partnership with executives, managers, supervisors, and trainees that will promote transfer from the training event, to the job, to the organization's bottom line.

FINDING OPPORTUNITY IN TRYING TIMES

The empirical basis for some of the best practices described in this article is stronger than in others. In their integrative review investigating the transfer of training, Burke and Hutchins (2007) identified three factors: learner, instructional design and delivery, and influences of the work environment. A summary of the variables related to the five practices described in this article appears in Table 6. Although research might be limited, a lack of research does not mean that training professionals should eschew these best practices. Adhering to them enables training professionals to link their contributions

TABLE 5	A SUMMARY OF MERRILL'S FIRST PRINCIPLES AND TRAINING IMPLICATIONS
MERRILL'S FIRST PRINCIPLES	TRAINING IMPLICATIONS
Learning is promoted when learners are engaged in solving real-world problems	Ensure that the problems addressed in the training correspond to real-world tasks in the organization. Increase task complexity and diversity over multiple lessons to ensure that trainees have experienced an adequate sampling of task-based experience.
Learning is promoted when existing knowledge is activated as a foundation for new knowledge	Relate what trainees know about organizational mission and objectives to the training they will complete. Relate the skill and knowledge trainees will master to what they already know about their jobs. Inform trainees that the skills, knowledge, and thought processes they will build during training are like those that exemplary performers use to perform their jobs.
Learning is promoted when new knowledge is demonstrated to the learner	Employ examples and nonexamples for concept learning, procedural demonstrations, process visualizations, and behavioral modeling depicting what exemplary performers actually think and do on the job. Draw attention to any invisible thought processes and mental models that support situational interpretations, decision making, or problem solving on the job. Point out relevant similarities and differences across multiple demonstrations.
Learning is promoted when new knowledge is applied by the learner	Provide enough authentic job-based practice to master an authentic job-based assessment indicating mastery of the instructional objective and exemplary performance of the corresponding task on the job. Provide scaffolding, coaching, and immediate feedback during the practices. Inform trainees that performing the assessment to stated standards means they can feel confident that they can perform their job tasks.
Learning is promoted when new knowledge is integrated into the learner's world	Provide opportunities for trainees to publicly demonstrate their new skills in ways that commit them to applying what they learned on the job. Provide posttraining opportunities for trainees to continue discussing how they are applying what they learned in training to their jobs and ways to improve. Provide posttraining opportunities for managers and supervisors to monitor and reinforce the application of learned skills on the job.

Source. Merrill, 2002.

to endeavors that executives think are important while demonstrating their due diligence in acting as stewards of the funds they receive.

Moving from order takers to partners in improved job performance will require training personnel to adopt appropriate short- and longer-term strategies. In the short term, training personnel could focus on seizing opportunities with low complexity and risks that offer large organizational returns. For example, one tactic may be cutting any training not directly aligned with organizational missions or business goals. Another is to use job aids or online cue cards in place of software training. In the longer term, training personnel can reposition their efforts to focus on performance improvement. Seen in this way, training becomes one of a variety of approaches for meeting this goal, a specific way to improve workplace performance in specific situations. Most of the opportunities to improve performance should address identifying and removing environmental barriers, which Dean (1997) suggests are the source of some 76% of the gaps between existing and desired performance.

Executives trying to cut operating costs to meet Wall Street expectations regarding profitability face tough questions about how they spend their monies. As they weigh their alternatives, they will be wondering, "What have you done for me recently that matters?" It will be far easier for them to cut mere order takers who deliver requested training than problem solvers who deliver improved job performance in ways that support business goals. As training professionals, or HPT professionals promoting training solutions, the choice to become "strategic organizational player[s]" is ours (Aguinis & Kraiger, 2009, p. 466). What will we do to survive these trying times and prepare ourselves for what comes next?

Note: This article is a condensed version of an article that originally appeared under the same title in Volume 23, Number 2 of Performance Improvement Quarterly *in 2010.*

TABLE 6	DEGREE OF EMPIRICAL SUPPORT BURKE AND HUTCHINS FOUND FOR THE FIVE BEST PRACTICES DESCRIBED IN THIS ARTICLE			
FIVE BEST PRACTICES TO SURVIVE TRYING ECONOMIC TIMES	BURKE AND HUTCHINS'S VARIABLES	NUMBER OF REPORTED STUDIES	STRONG OR MODERATE RELATIONSHIP TO TRANSFER	SOME RESEARCH
Align training efforts with organizational missions and business goals	Strategic link	3		√
Use training only when it addresses a gap between existing and desired performance arising from a lack of requisite skill	Needs analysis	6		√
Craft instructional objectives that describe exemplary job performance	Learning goals and content relevance	16	√	
Create sound training programs that promote learning and transfer to the job	Practice, feedback, and behavioral modeling	18	√	
Collaborate with sponsors and other stakeholders outside the training department to promote transfer of training to the job	Transfer climate, supervisory support, peer support, opportunity to perform	33	√	

Source. Burke and Hutchins, 2007.

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